

describe how the book of Revelations will play out. "It will take seven years," she declares, "just to clean the blood and bodies after the battle." And so on.

Still, Chafets never loses sight of the essential point. Though some evangelicals may be squares or oddballs, these are people who, he writes, have "no trouble recognizing fascism when they see it, and no hesitation about confronting it." Their solidarity with Israel—and their commitment to resisting radical Islam—is principled and heartfelt, and is based less on theological designs on the Jews than on seeing today's threats for what they are.

Chafets does point to some worrisome trends, however. Stung by the attacks of the ADL and other Jewish groups, some evangelicals may have begun to reconsider—or, in the words of Donald Wildmon, the leader of the American Family Association, "to get fed up and [to] say . . . 'if that's the way you feel, we just won't support Israel.'" At the same time, the spread of evangelical missions to Muslim countries may eventually cause the movement to be less vociferous in its support of Israel for fear of putting new adherents in harm's way.

Chafets is optimistic that American Jews can be reconciled to their evangelical neighbors, but the chasm is wider than he allows. Middle-class "attitudes" may unite the two groups at some level, as he suggests, but to judge by survey data and voting behavior, promoting these values has hardly been at the top of the agenda for many American Jews. Instead, their most pressing concerns in recent years have been such causes as gay marriage, abortion on demand, and the banishment of all religious sentiment from the public square. Finding staunch allies eager to support the state of Israel has taken a decided backseat. This, alas, is the nettle that Zev Chafets, in his well-meant sojourn among the evangelicals, fails to grasp.

## Calling the Signals

### Johnny U: The Life and Times of John Unitas

by Tom Callahan

*Crown. 292 pp. \$24.95*

Reviewed by  
George Weigel

THE NATIONAL Football League (NFL) is the most successful professional sports operation in history, a money-making machine that seems never to sleep. But is the game as sound as the balance sheet, or has the corporate and bureaucratic ethos that keeps the NFL purring in profitability trickled down to the playing field, with unhappy results?

Consider an offhand comment by Al Saunders, a Washington Redskins coach, in late August. The Redskins had just lost their third straight pre-season contest with another torpid performance by Mark Brunell, the team's multi-million-dollar-per-year quarterback. Saunders, however, who pulls down a healthy \$2 million per annum himself, was unworried: "The good news is that in our system, we're not asking Mark to win the game for us. . . . We're asking him to manage the game . . . not to try to do too much and [to] let the offense work for him."

During the NFL's golden age in the late 50's and 60's, one could no more have imagined a coach telling the great quarterback John Unitas to "manage the game" than one could have imagined Pope Julius II asking Michelangelo to manage the painting of the Sistine Chapel ceiling. ("Just follow my plan and let the paint work for you.") But over the past two decades, pro football on the field has become a game in

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which, time and again, "system" trumps personal initiative and, even more importantly, personal responsibility. Tom Callahan's *Johnny U: The Life and Times of John Unitas* explains why this should be a matter of regret, and not only for football fans.

According to no less an authority than *Sports Illustrated*, John Constantine Unitas, who died in 2002 at the age of sixty-nine, was the greatest quarterback in NFL history. To mark his death, the magazine created a statistical matrix, the "U-ratings," to prove its point mathematically. But those of us who watched him, and idolized him, for the seventeen years during which he quarterbacked the Baltimore Colts had no need of statistics to tell us what we knew. As the sportswriter Frank Deford put it shortly after Unitas's funeral in 2002, "If there were one game scheduled, Earth versus the Klingons, with the fate of the universe on the line, any person with his wits about him would have Johnny U calling the signals in the huddle, up under the center, back in the pocket."

Calling the signals and playing to win—not managing a "system." "Systems" are for Klingons. Talent, imagination, physical courage, leadership, and coolness under fire are for men.

YOU DO NOT have to be born in western Pennsylvania to be a great quarterback, but it helps—or so names like George Blanda, Jim Kelly, Johnny Lujack, Dan Marino, Joe Montana, Joe Namath, and Babe Parilli suggest. Kelly, one of the two best quarterbacks (with Marino) never to win an NFL championship, has attributed the region's disproportionate record to the local work ethic—an ethic, he told Callahan, "that says, 'What you get out of something depends on what you put into it.'" The theologian Michael Novak, who grew up in those parts, cites as well the region's east-central European heritage: "You're down

19-7 with only seven minutes to play? Big deal. It's been that way for a thousand years."

That was John Unitas's world: the ethnic (in his case, Lithuanian) and family-centered universe of Depression-era steel mills, mines, and coal-delivery trucks. Unitas's father, who operated one of those trucks, died at thirty-eight, technically of kidney failure and pneumonia but more likely of sheer exhaustion. His son evinced football promise early on, though it took a while for the world to notice. After an impressive high-school career, the skinny, 135-pound player was turned down by Notre Dame and settled for a scholarship to the University of Louisville. There, throughout his undergraduate career, he pretty much *was* the football team, showing enough form—and enough of his laser-like arm—to attract some professional attention.

In 1955, the Pittsburgh Steelers drafted Unitas in the ninth round, but then cut him at the end of the pre-season. Unitas, who had married in college, went to work on a Pittsburgh construction gang to support his young family, and played \$6-per-game sandlot football on a local semi-pro team. Then along came the Baltimore Colts.

THE COLTS of the early 1950's had been a monument to ineptitude. But by mid-decade, some shrewd drafting—crucial in the days before free agency made for virtually unlimited player movement—was laying the foundations of a winner. At quarterback, the team thought it had the answer in an All-American college player named George Shaw. When Shaw tore up his knee in 1956, his replacement was Unitas, whom the Colts' general manager had signed for the price of an eighty-cent phone call and who had made an impression during training camp and pre-season. Rushed into the game as Shaw's back-up, Unitas threw his first NFL pass—promptly intercepted by the Chicago Bears and returned for a touchdown.

It was an inauspicious beginning, but some on the team already liked what they had seen in Unitas during the brief months they had known him. These players included Gino Marchetti, a defensive end who had enlisted in the army after a high-school scrape ("I figured I could either face the Germans or I could face my father") and had then played collegiate football on an undefeated University of San Francisco team; the defensive tackle Art Donovan, who prepared for NFL combat by taping old issues of *Time* and *Newsweek* to his shins; Raymond Berry, the myopic wide receiver with one leg shorter than the other; Alan "the Horse" Ameche, a Heisman Trophy winner from Wisconsin who looked more like a tenor in a Verdi opera than a fullback; and Jim Mutscheller, a tight end from Notre Dame who had fought as a marine in Korea and, Callahan writes, "had a look in his eye that could bore a hole in a vault."

They would all become friends on a team that, in its ethnic and racial diversity (and tension)—the Colts showcased such prototype black football greats as the halfback Lenny Moore, the offensive tackle Jim Parker, and the defensive tackle Eugene "Big Daddy" Lipscomb—was a kind of NFL analogy to the Brooklyn Dodgers depicted in Roger Kahn's *The Boys of Summer*. Berry would become Unitas's other half; the two worked for hours after practice, refining their timing, devising plays that Unitas would store on the hard drive of his fine football brain, ready for access at the right moment.

THAT MOMENT would be one of Unitas's own choosing. After becoming the Colts' starting quarterback midway through the 1956 season, he was both the team's on-field leader and what in today's bureaucratized NFL would be called the offensive coordinator. True, he would talk over the game plan with head coach Weeb Ewbank and oth-

ers on Ewbank's staff; but when, for example, he was asked in 1959 by Don McCafferty, a new offensive assistant coach, whether he needed any help, he replied: "Mac, if you're *positive* they're going to blitz, let me know. Otherwise, sit back, relax, and enjoy the game."

Unitas could get away with this because, the year before, he had led the Colts to the NFL championship in what is now habitually referred to as "The Greatest Game Ever Played." This was the first (and, to date, only) championship game in NFL history to be settled in sudden-death overtime—and, thanks to television, the game that indelibly impressed the NFL on the national psyche. The crucial play, which tied the game with seven seconds left, had been born more than two years earlier in one of those endless post-practice sessions between quarterback Unitas and receiver Berry. Unitas had asked Berry what he would do if, in running an L-shaped pattern, a certain linebacker were lined up directly in front of him. Berry replied that he'd give him an outside fake, try to make the linebacker come after him, and then "jump underneath him" to break into the clear.

Unitas had nodded, and said not a word more until the sun was setting over Yankee Stadium on December 28, 1958. When the Colts came to the line of scrimmage with a minute left in regulation time, Berry saw New York Giants linebacker Harlan Svare standing straight in front of him—and glanced over at Unitas. "I'll never forget the look John gave me," Berry told Callahan decades later. "I made the fake I had described to Unitas two years earlier, and Svare came right after me. I jumped underneath him and John zipped it on a perfect line," achieving a 25-yard gain, a first down at midfield, and, ultimately, the tying field goal that led to overtime and the Colts' victory.

No offensive coordinator, equipped with instant replay, a three-inch-

thick playbook, and a computer, called that play; it was called by a supreme football intelligence on the field, retrieving the necessary information and applying it with a contagious confidence. That confidence, matched by an equally striking humility, was one reason why Unitas's teammates followed him unreservedly. Another was Unitas's conviction that he was, despite being the main man, a teammate. "How can I help you?" he would ask in what fellow Colt Alex Hawkins called "his cathedral," the huddle. "Is there anything I can do?" (Once, according to Callahan, Jim Parker reported to Unitas in the cathedral that an opponent "just called me a nigger." Unitas said, 'We can't have that. Let him through this time.' John hit him right in the forehead with a bullet pass. 'He fell like a f—kin' tree,' Parker recalled.)

But perhaps above all, his team-

mates respected Unitas's willingness to take responsibility, not only when he was throwing his laser passes but when he missed (which, in the nature of the case, he did 45 percent of the time) or when his receivers failed him. Here is Gino Marchetti on an intercepted pass:

He'd quietly go up to the intended receiver and say, "You weren't where you were supposed to be on that play. If you don't start studying and know your plays, I'll never throw to you again." Then, when the newspaper guys came into the locker room, John would say, "My fault. Overthrew him."

Under Unitas, the Colts took the NFL title in 1958 and 1959 and won Super Bowl V in 1971; several other times during the 60's, they fielded what was arguably the league's best team, only to be denied the chance to play for the champi-

onship by bad luck or scheduling vagaries. In 1969, they lost Super Bowl III to Joe Namath and the upstart New York Jets (coached by Weeb Ewbank, coach of the Colts' 1958 overtime victory), in part because Don Shula, who would go on to become the winningest coach in NFL history, failed to get Unitas into the game soon enough.

IN AN IRONY about which Unitas never complained, it is Vince Lombardi's Green Bay Packers, not John Unitas's Baltimore Colts, whom most people associate with the NFL's golden age. One can understand why. The Colts were sold in 1972 to Robert Irsay, an air-conditioning mogul and shamelessly mendacious self-promoter who essentially ran Unitas out of town and would later steal the team from Baltimore and move it to Indianapolis. Unitas, after trying to make a go of

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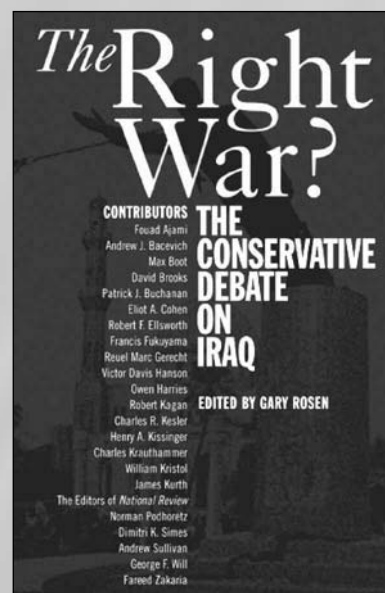
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it playing in San Diego, retired—but not before giving invaluable tutelage to a young quarterback, Dan Fouts, later to be inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame.

Like many others in the football pantheon, Unitas tried his hand as a color commentator on TV; it did not pan out. But a happy second marriage and three new children brightened Unitas's last two-and-a-half decades, during which he suffered business reverses and, thanks to the long-term effects of the grid-iron wars, lost the use of the right hand that had once thrown a record number of NFL touchdown passes.

Unitas never cottoned to the idea of the "Indianapolis Colts," but to this day there is a special tribute to him at every home game of the Baltimore Ravens. Raymond Berry, with whom Unitas is ever identified in the memories of their fans, offered a tribute at the 2002 funeral Mass in Baltimore's Cathedral of Mary Our Queen. Asserting that Unitas had "made the impossible possible," Berry addressed his departed teammate:

You did more than perform on the field. Individual achievements and glory didn't have a place on your priority list. All of us knew that you were focused on . . . winning the game. You didn't care who did what. Just do our jobs when called on, and we all win together. The Colts were a team, and your example and leadership set the tone.

It was, of course, a different time and a different ethos in the days when John Unitas walked the playing field like a slope-shouldered, bandy-legged hero out of *High Noon* by way of the Pittsburgh sandlots. Everybody, Unitas included, had an off-season job, selling paint or insurance or cars or whatever, because NFL salaries would not support a family. They were beer drinkers, not steroid ingesters, and while most of them lived comfortably after their playing careers, and some of them became very wealthy from business, none of them became millionaires from football—as top draft choices do today before

they ever strap on an NFL helmet.

The story of John Unitas is thus almost inconceivable today. But does that mean it is also, ultimately, a futile one, good only for its capacity to evoke nostalgia? I think not. Unitas never regarded himself as anything other than an honest craftsman, a professional who was proud to play football and play it well. But in plying his trade, he embodied a set of distinctively American qualities: self-reliance; the work ethic; individual excellence married to a passion for the team; confidence tempered by humility; physical and mental toughness; loyalty; a democratic as distinguished from an aristocratic sense of dignity and honor.

Those qualities of character, so essential to a democracy, and especially to a democracy under assault, will commend Unitas's example to future generations, no matter what happens to the NFL. In Tom Callahan's fine book, they will have a reliable guide not only to who Unitas was but why he mattered—and matters still.

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**Jeane J. Kirkpatrick**

1926-2006

Indomitable spirit, hero of liberty, dearest friend.

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